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JOCK, THE PROCESSIONER

It was lives ago that I knew Jock. He was a part of the life that clustered around the stately old stuccoed house, whose tall fluted columns of stone were to my childish eye as steadfast as Yggdrasil, the world tree, whose roots enwound the earth. The tree was shattered by Ragnarok, the twilight of the gods; the Old House went down in the War, that welter of pain and ruin, and with it went those serene and powerful beings who had been at least the demi-gods of my early existence.

It had never occurred to me that Providence and my grandfather could be at odds. They had seemed so closely and fittingly allied! I was by no means devoid of imagination; I had thought often of death; but I had never thought of the possibility that I should cease to reside in the Old House. Those days are to me now by turns an oft-recurring dream and a reality that renders the alien present shadowy and unsubstantial.

Jock came with our English housekeeper. I do not remember their advent. Perhaps they came before I was born. My grandfather wrote to secure Mrs. Taylor's services, and she agreed to come. But a place must be found for Jock where he would be comfortable. I have been told that one afternoon she found him, sitting beside a country road, half clad in rags, cold, and very hungry, piping a doleful strain upon a kind of whistle of his own construction. A very few questions and answers served to show how things stood with him. He had but the rudiments of a mind—was, in short, almost an idiot. He could not tell her where he lived, nor who he was, save that his name was Jock. He was bound nowhither, and he sat beside the road, it seemed, to play upon his whistle and because there was nowhere to go.

His eyes were faithful and kind and reflected pathetically his wretched condition. His black, scarred, twisted face, with all its ugliness, could never have been mistaken for vicious. It looked at her with a glimmer of hope from the midst of settled despair.

He shivered in the autumn afternoon, and the old lady, much perplexed,— for she looked her life straight in the face and solved her problems stolidly,— at length bade him follow her. From that day she had cared for him and he, perhaps, in a dim way, had worshipped her. No more was added to his history. He was quite positive that his name was Jock ; beyond this he knew nothing.

When my grandfather learned about Jock, he wrote that he could have a room in the big servants' house in the back-yard, and the very excellent letters of recommendation Mrs. Taylor had sent were as nothing in his eyes to the fact that she had befriended this friendless soul.

Jock had his definite place in the hierarchy of the Old House ; he swept the yard. I suppose there was nothing else for him to do, for Daddy Bird was coachman and allowed no other hand to touch his horses or their stable ; Cæsar was the cook and Laura, his wife, the wash'woman ; Reuben cut the wood and stored it by the great fire-places in the big high rooms, and for the rest there were Leah and Matilda and Pompey and old Aunt Emmaline, and I know not how many other friendly, half-forgotten, dusky faces that came and went between the central life in town and the plantation not many miles away.

In the front-yard there were magnolia trees, splendid, symmetrical towers of burnished green, shot in season with exquisite white. The perfume of their flowers stabs my heart unto this day. In the back-yard great fig trees grew high above the eaves of Mrs. Taylor's cottage, apricots by the servants' house, and pecans just beyond the wide shade of the porch, whence one could hear the brown nuts fall in the sunny afternoons. These dropped their leaves for Jock to sweep away, and twice daily Mrs. Taylor saw him do it. Affable was Jock to all and her he obeyed implicitly. He took pleasure and pride in his task once done, but, unwatched, he was sometimes prone to overlook it, for there were other matters which constantly demanded his attention.

His real occupation was master of the revels, and as there were many children he was often needed. Ah, I think I shall never forget the poor, kindly shambling creature, his black, mis-

shaped face aglow with enthusiasm as he sat in the moonlight at his favorite post atop the wide, low, stone wall, blowing tunes through his battered whistle, while all the children danced thereto beneath the trees. His whistle, to which he was passionately devoted, he had made from flattened tomato cans, and none of the painted, musical substitutes we gave him at Christmas ever supplanted it. He sat aloft, a careless, merry soul, and made our music and cheered us on and stamped time always with his foot. When I forget what manner of little people we were in that far time,—that group now scattered and old and thinned by death,—I have but to close my eyes and recall Jock and his beating foot. He never failed us. He was not ever downcast or distraught, and one had but to find him to discover jollity. He piped, I fear, no air of any school, but he always piped with spirit and with gayety.

Music stirred him strangely; when it passed he followed, always: and some primeval chord within him, unguarded by those encrustations of more mentally fortunate natures, thrilled in the same way to color. He treasured every scrap of it. His room, I remember, was ablaze from floor to ceiling with a thousand jangling hues.

This, perhaps, lay at the root of his affection for my youngest sister. For more deep than his love for color and tune and idleness, more devoted even than his loyalty to Mrs. Taylor, was his adoration of the radiant little girl—her heavy, lustrous curls, her exquisite, apple-blossom cheeks, her little cloak of flaming red. Jock was infinitely patient where she was concerned and ever faithful to her tyrannous commissions and baby desires. At that time no morning ever dawned that did not find him at about the same hour knocking gently at the nursery door and asking in his queer, cracked voice if she was well, and he never went away nor could be got to do anything for anyone until her childish tones had reassured him. She found it rather a bore and ordered Jock about outrageously, but I believe they understood each other.

When funerals passed, or fire parades, circus folks, or politicians on the march, the sweeping of the leaves held him not. Jock was a born processioner. Instantly he joined the passing

throng and disappeared, in spite of threat or protest. Good Mrs. Taylor, who feared some accident to him in the crowd, always vainly tried to catch him. When her outcries rang loudly through the house and Jock's name resounded about the place, we knew he had taken his whistle and followed some parade, and usually we found across the front walk his broom, beside its pile of leaves. He always shambled back, dusty and happy, and he was always scolded. He took it as a matter of course, but humbly and not lightly.

One day a different parade went by—men in bright uniforms who blew clear, merry, ringing notes from bugles that glittered in the morning sun—happy men who sang and jested and marched to the beat of a jubilant drum that must have set Jock's poor head awirling and his feet stirring uneasily. No one had an eye for him that day. For the uniforms that meant nothing to him except spots of blue to delight the eye, spelled, even to us, the children, almost the last word of tragedy and fear.

While the bulwarks of our life were crashing around us, and the bitter tide of anguish flowed over our souls, Jock who loved us marched gaily out and away forever with the Yankee army.

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